

Orangutan SSP Spotlight

Name: Megan Elder

SSP Job Title: SSP Coordinator; Steering Committee Chair; & International Orangutan Studbook Keeper

Brief info about yourself: Born and raised in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I've always known that I wanted to work with animals in a zoological setting. I received my Bachelors of Science from the University of Wisconsin – River Falls where I majored in Biology and minored in Psychology... a winning combo for working with great apes. During college, I volunteered and interned at the Minnesota Zoo and my first paid keeper position was at Bramble Park Zoo in Watertown, South Dakota. I've been at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory in Saint Paul, Minnesota since 2002. In my spare time (what's that?), my interests include laughing with friends, seeing live music, collecting tattoos, jungle excursions, and traveling the world.



Your job title (not SSP, but the zoo you currently work at): Primate Zookeeper at the Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Aside from our four orangutans, I also care for Western lowland gorillas, Francois' langurs, Patas Monkeys, Black-handed spider monkeys, White-faced sakis; Geoffroy's, Golden Headed Lion, and Emperor tamarins; Blue-eyed black lemurs... and a Hoffmann's two-toed sloth... oh, and some Guinea fowl.





Your history with orangutans: I've worked with orangutans since 2003 at my current zoo. I received the appointment to International Orangutan Studbook Keeper from WAZA back in 2008 and became Vice Chair for the SSP in 2012. In 2021 I was appointed Orangutan SSP Coordinator. I've been traveling to Borneo 1-2 times each year since 2010, first as a "guinea pig" for a test group of N. American zookeepers volunteering at orangutan rescue rehabilitation

centers in E. Kalimantan and then as a team leader assisting the Orangutan SSP Field Advisor (Ronda Schwetz). We facilitate workshops, deliver medical and husbandry supplies, and provide keeper exchange opportunities (propping out enclosures, building enrichment, and teaching positive reinforcement methods for working with non-releasable orangutans) at zoos and rescue centers in Southeast Asia. I also travel to international conferences and assist with population analyses in my role as the ISB Keeper. I feel like I have the best of all worlds... I'm involved in population management, travel to and work with rehabilitation centers in Borneo & Sumatra, and, most importantly, work directly with the orangutans at my zoo.

Why orangutans? Because they're AWESOME! They had me at [insert raspberry sound]. Who doesn't love an ape that blows raspberries and makes farty sounds to get your attention? Seriously though, I love their inquisitiveness, thoughtfulness, and mischief making ways. They always keep you on your toes and are full of surprises, both good and bad. An orangutan keeper's job is never boring. If it is, then they're up to something and you should be worried.





Best experience with orangutans: My best experience, by far, was managing an emergency c-section and reintroduction of an infant to his mother, “Markisa” (a first-time mom), 11 days post-surgery. The infant had a lot of fluid in his lungs but pulled through. We named him “Jaya”, which means “victorious” in Bahasa. Coincidentally, there is another c-section male named Jaya in the UK. He was born at the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust

in Jersey, three years prior. I did not know of this male (and of any other orangutan in a zoo) named Jaya until I became the studbook keeper. Crazy stuff. Watching our Jaya grow up over the past (almost) seven years, with his mom (who is very special and a success story in her own right) has been the most rewarding experience that I have had by far. Their bond is amazing. He is a very special, albeit crazy, kid.

Worst experience with orangutans: Experiencing the joys and sorrows of having an orangutan get pregnant and then deliver a stillborn. This is what happened with our female Markisa’s first pregnancy in 2005 when she experienced dystocia during labor. Fortunately, she did pass the infant on her own and she did demonstrate maternal care. We gave her time alone with the infant until she was ready to put the infant down and join the rest of the social group. Sadly, she experienced trouble again during her second attempt at labor but we caught that one in time and she is a great, albeit sassy, mom today.

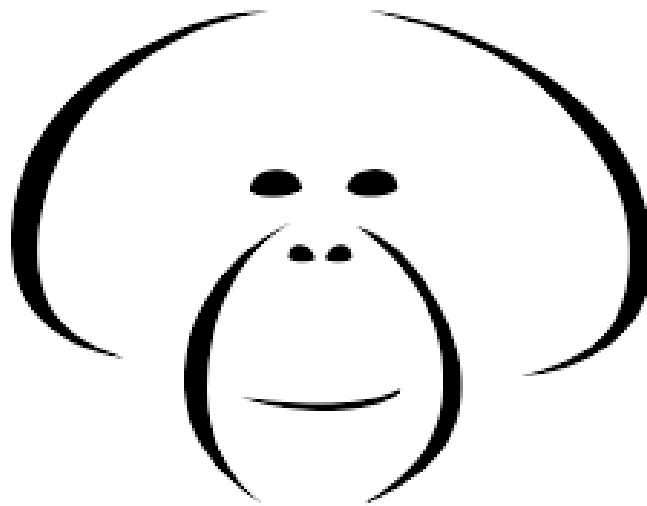


Biggest career accomplishment involving orangutans: I’d have to say receiving the appointment of International Orangutan Studbook Keeper by the World Association of Zoos & Aquariums (WAZA) as a ZOOKEEPER. Many folks assume that I am a PhD or a high-level manager at my zoo but nope, I’m a keeper that aims big and has great support from her zoo (and lots of great mentors along the way). It’s a huge labor of love and worth every second of frustration and numerous hours spent on my laptop at home. I’m pretty much married to it for the rest of my career.... and possibly then some.



The most unique form of orangutan memorabilia you own: I own a lot of artwork, images, books, and trinkets from my travels to Borneo and Sumatra but my favorite memorabilia includes a beautiful book of photos and news stories pertaining to Como Zoo's orangutans and the birth of Jaya that a visitor made and gave to me. It was so very touching and demonstrates the connections that our zoo ambassadors can make with our guests. I also have a little mini-Megan that a certain admin for the Orangutan SSP Facebook page had made of me. I like to bring it to our annual steering

committee meeting to creep out Lori Perkins. After seeing her creepy little orangutan sitting at a desk trinket, she can start bringing that to meetings to creep me out in return. I also have lots of random "Bigfoot" stuff. I seem to attract that stuff.



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